  
Marching To Valley Forge

" . . . you might have tracked the army from White Marsh to Valley Forge by the blood of their feet."  
                                                                                                                       - George Washington

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| Valley Forge, 40 km (25 mi) west of Philadelphia, was the campground of 11,000 troops of [George Washington's](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/GWASH.HTM) [Continental Army](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/CONTAR.HTM) from Dec. 19, 1777, to June 19, 1778. Because of the suffering endured there by the hungry, poorly clothed, and badly housed troops, 2,500 of whom died during the harsh winter, Valley Forge came to symbolize the heroism of the American revolutionaries. Despite adverse circumstances, [Baron Friedrich von Steuben](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/VONSTUB.HTM) drilled the soldiers regularly and improved their discipline. Today the historic landmarks and monuments are preserved within Valley Forge National Historical Park (established 1976). |

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| *A week before Christmas '77 Washington's army took up winter quarters at Valley Forge on the west side of the Schuylkill. Although the General's choice of location was sharply criticized, the site he had selected was central and easily defended. Then came a cruel race with time to get huts erected before the soldiers, barefoot and half naked, froze to death. Hundreds of horses did in fact starve to death, and for the army starvation was a mortal danger. "No meat, no meat!" was the constant wail. Improvements came about after Nathanael Greene assumed the duties of Quartermaster General on March 23rd.*  *Yet, despite the ever-present fear of mutiny, no real dissaffection occurred. As Hessian Major Baurmeister conceded, the army was kept from disintegrating by the "spirit of liberty." Men and officers accepted their tragic plight with a sense of humor and extraordinary forbearance, but it was an ordeal that no army could be expected to undergo for long. Nathanael Greene wrote to General Washington, "God grant we may never be brought to such a wretched condition again."* -The Spirit of 'Seventy Six |

http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/STAR.GIF

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| "A light snow fell as 12,000 weary men made their way up Gulph Road to the area selected only days before as winter quarters."  "Lewis Hurt, age 17, a private from Connecticut. Benjamin Blossom, age about 31 years, a soldier from Massachusetts. George Ewing, age 23, an Ensign of the Seventh Company in the Third New Jersey Regiment. Joseph Plumb Martin, age 15 when he enlisted in Connecticut's Third Company on July 6, 1776; age 16 when he arrived at Valley Forge. They came from Virginia, North Carolina, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New Jersey...They represented every state in the new union."  "Some were still boys -- as young as 12 -- others in their 50s and 60s. They were described as fair, pale, freckled, brown, swarthy and black. While the majority were white, the army included both Negroes and American Indians."  "Each man had few possessions and these he carried with him. His musket -- by far the most popular weapon -- a cartouche or cartridge box. If he had neither, the infantryman carried a powder horn, hunting bag and bullet pouch. His knapsack or haversack held his extra clothing (if he was fortunate enough to have any), a blanket, a plate and spoon, perhaps a knife, fork and tumbler. Canteens were often shared with others and six to eight men shared cooking utensils."  "The first order of business was shelter. An active field officer was appointed for each brigade to superintend the business of hutting. Twelve men were to occupy each hut. The officers' hut, located to the rear, would house fewer men. Each brigade would also build a hospital, 15x25 feet. Many of the Brigadier Generals used local farmhouses as their quarters. Some, including Henry Knox, later moved into huts to be closer to their men."  "The huts provided greater comfort than the tents used by the men when on campaign. But after months of housing unwashed men and food waste, these cramped quarters fostered discomfort and disease. Albigence Waldo complained, 'my Skin & eyes are almost spoil'd with continual smoke.' Putrid fever, the itch, diarrhea, dysentery and rheumatism were some of the other afflictions suffered by the Continental troops."  "Little is known about the women but there were women at Valley Forge. Junior officers' wives probably remained in the homes of their husbands and socialized among themselves. The enlisted men's wives lived and labored among the troops, some working as housekeepers for the officers; others as cooks. The most common positions were nurse and laundress. A washerwoman might work for wages or charge by the piece." |

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| An estimated 34,577 pounds of meat and 168 barrels of flour per day were needed to feed the army. Shortages were particularly acute in December and February. Foraging expeditions were sent into the surrounding countryside to round up cattle and other supplies. In February three public markets opened. Farmers were encouraged to sell their produce. Fresh Pork, Fat Turkey, Goose, Rough skinned Potatoes, Turnips, Indian Meal, Sour-Crout, Leaf Tobacco, New Milk, Cyder, and Small Beer were included in the list of articles published in the Pennsylvania Packet and circulated in hand bills."  "Entertainment at Valley Forge took many forms. The officers liked to play cricket (known also as wicket) and on at least one occasion were joined by His Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief. Several plays were staged including Joseph Addison's 'Cato' which played to a packed audience. A common recreation was drinking, when spirits were available. And the soldiers liked to sing."  "Throughout the winter and early spring, men were frequently 'on command,' leaving camp on a variety of assignments. Units were formed to forage for food, some were granted furloughs, and individuals regularly returned to their home states to recruit new troops. In January Jeremiah Greenman reported, 'all ye spayr officers sent home to recrute a nother regiment & sum on furlow.'"   |  |  | | --- | --- | | http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/valley3.jpg   |  | | --- | | "On February 23, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin, Baron von Steuben, arrived at Valley Forge to offer his military skills to the patriot cause. Washington assigned him the duties of Acting Inspector General and gave him the task of developing and carrying out a practical training program." | |   "Foreign officers were an essential part of the [Continental Army](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/CONTAR.HTM). They provided military skills which the Americans lacked. Some, including Steuben, the Marquis de Lafayette and the Baron de Kalb came as volunteers. Kalb quickly proved himself to Washington and Congress commissioned him a major general. Lafayette was given the command of a division of Virginia light troops in December 1777 and later took command of additional troops. Others, such as Engineer Louis Lebèque de Presle Duportail were "covert" aid given leave from the French Army to provide assistance to the Americans. It was Duportail who designed the Valley Forge Encampment."  "With spring the balance shifted. New recruits arrived daily. Reluctantly, Nathanael Greene accepted the appointment as Quarter Master General and began to correct the problems with supplies. Under Steuben's direction the Continentals had become professionals, if not career soldiers. Morale improved as confidence grew."  "General Orders, Tuesday. May 5, 1778 announced the alliance with France and plans 'to set apart a day for gratefully acknowledging the divine Goodness.'"  "On June 19, 1778, six months to the day following their arrival, the Commander-in-Chief [General George Washington](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/GWASH.HTM) and the Continental Army departed Valley Forge and marched to [Monmouth](http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/BATTLES.HTM#anchor041), New Jersey to engage the British in battle just nine days later."  "This was the army that would continue to victory at Yorktown." |

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| http://www.nps.gov/history/logcabin/images/text_top.gif |
| |  | | --- | | **Valley Forge Encampment *A Winter of Suffering***  *"To see the men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without blankets to lie upon, without shoes...without a house or hut to cover them until those could be built, and submitting without a murmur, is a proof of patience and obedience which, in my opinion, can scarcely be paralleled."*  ***George Washington at Valley Forge, April 21, 1778***  You know how it feels when your stomach rumbles? Well, imagine that you are in the army and eating "firecake" (a tasteless mixture of flour and water) day after day. You have had very little bread or meat to eat, your shoes are worn through, your clothes were made for warmer weather or well worn from many battles, and you have no warm place to sleep. Would you complain? Sure! However, according to General George Washington's letter to Congress, the soldiers in his Continental Army did not.  The Continental Army arrived at Valley Forge on December 19, 1777, after a tough campaign of battles with the British. Since early fall, the General had problems with getting supplies to his troops. As winter approached, the problems became worse. Soldiers received irregular supplies of meat and bread. Shortages forced the men to forage for food in the forests and farm fields that they passed.  Conditions were so severe at times that General Washington wrote, "that unless some great and capital change suddenly takes place... this Army must inevitably... starve, dissolve, or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can." (Pollarine). Feeding the 12,000+ men at the encampment was only one of the problems facing the Commander-in-Chief. General Washington also was having a tough time getting support from Congress. There were threats to his leadership. His officers were unhappy and he needed to better prepare the troops to meet the enemy in the coming campaign.  Clothing, too, was a problem. Long marches had destroyed the men's shoes. Blankets were scarce. Tattered garments were seldom replaced. At one point, these shortages caused nearly 4,000 men to be listed as "unfit for duty."  Undernourished, poorly clothed and living in crowded, damp quarters, many soldiers became very sick. Typhus, typhoid, dysentery, and pneumonia killed as many as 2,000 men that had been sent from camp to hospitals established in the surrounding countryside during the winter of 1777-78. Although Washington repeatedly asked the Congress for help, it was not available and the soldiers continued to suffer. Wives, sisters, and daughters of the enlisted men tried to ease the suffering by providing desperately needed services such as laundry and possibly nursing care.  **Why Is This Site Important?** The encampment of the Continental Army at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78 is one of the most renowned aspects of the American Revolution. The hardships the ordinary soldier endured while living in makeshift log huts has become legendary.  Learn more about Valley Forge: | |



Gen. George Washington at Valley Forge

*Photograph Courtesy of the National Park Service*

**Arrival:**

In the fall of 1777, General George Washington's Continental Army moved south from New Jersey to defend the capital of Philadelphia from the advancing forces of [General William Howe](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/americanrevolutio1/p/whowe.htm). Clashing at [Brandywine](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/americanrevolution/p/American-Revolution-Battle-Of-Brandywine.htm) on September 11, Washington was decisively defeated, leading the Continental Congress to flee the city. Fifteen days later, after outmaneuvering Washington, Howe entered Philadelphia unopposed. Seeking to regain the initiative, Washington struck at [Germantown](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/americanrevolution/p/germantown.htm) on October 4, but was again defeated. With the campaign season ending and cold weather rapidly approaching, Washington moved his army into winter quarters.

For his winter encampment, Washington selected Valley Forge on the Schuylkill River approximately 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia. With its high ground and position near the river, Valley Forge was easily defensible, but still close enough to the city for Washington to maintain pressure on the British. Despite the defeats of the fall, the 12,000 men of the Continental Army were in good spirits when they marched into Valley Forge on December 19, 1777.

**The Winter Encampment:**

Under the direction of the army's engineers, the men began constructing over 2,000 log huts laid out along military streets. In addition, defensive trenches and five redoubts were built to protect the encampment. To facilitate re-supply of the army, a bridge was erected over the Schuylkill. The winter at Valley Forge generally conjures images of half-naked, starving soldiers battling the elements. This was not the case. This imagery is largely the result of early, romanticized interpretations of the encampment story which were meant to serve as a parable about American perseverance.

Though far from ideal, the conditions of the encampment were on par with the Continental soldier's routine privations. During the early months of the encampment, supplies and provisions were scarce, but available. Soldiers made due with subsistence meals such as "firecake," a mixture of water and flour. While a lack of clothing caused suffering among some the men, many were fully uniformed with the best equipped units used for foraging and patrols. During the early months at Valley Forge, Washington lobbied to improve the army's supply situation with some success.

To supplement those supplies received from Congress, Washington sent [Brigadier General Anthony Wayne](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/americanrevolutio1/p/anthony-wayne.htm) to New Jersey in February 1778, to gather food and cattle for the men. A month later, Wayne returned with 50 head of cattle and 30 horses. With the arrival of warmer weather in March, disease began strike at the army. Over the next three months, influenza, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery all erupted within the encampment. Of the 2,000 men who died at Valley Forge, over two-thirds were killed by disease. These outbreaks were eventually contained through sanitation regulations, inoculations, and the work of surgeons.

**Drilling with von Steuben:**

On February 23, 1778, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben arrived in the camp. A former member of the Prussian General Staff, von Steuben had been recruited to the American cause in Paris by Benjamin Franklin. Accepted by Washington, von Steuben was put to work designing a training program for the army. Though he spoke no English, von Steuben commenced his program in March with the aid of interpreters. Beginning with a "model company" of 100 chosen men, von Steuben instructed them in drill, maneuver, and a simplified manual of arms.

These 100 men were in turn sent out to other units to repeat the process and so on until the entire army was trained. In addition, von Steuben introduced a system of progressive training for recruits which educated them in the basics of soldiering. Surveying the encampment, von Steuben greatly improved sanitation by reorganizing the camp and repositioning kitchens and latrines. The results of von Steuben's training were immediately evident at Barren Hill (May 20) and the [Battle of Monmouth](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars16011800/p/Monmouth.htm) (June 28). In both cases, the Continental soldiers stood up to and fought on equal footing with the British professionals.

**Departure:**

Though the winter at Valley Forge had been trying for both the men and the leadership, the Continental Army emerged as a stronger fighting force. Washington, having survived various intrigues, such as the Conway Cabal, to remove him from command, cemented himself as the army's military and spiritual leader, while the men, stiffened by von Steuben, were superior soldiers to those that had arrived in December 1777. On May 6, 1778, the army celebrated the announcement of the alliance with France. This change in the course of the war, prompted the British to evacuate Philadelphia and return to New York.

Hearing of the British departure from the city, Washington and the army left Valley Forge in pursuit on June 19. Nine days later, the Continental Army intercepted the British at the [Battle of Monmouth](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/battleswars16011800/p/Monmouth.htm). Fighting through extreme heat, the army's training showed as it battled the British to a draw. At its next major encounter, the [Battle of Yorktown](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/americanrevolutio1/p/yorktown.htm), it would be victorious.